



NEWS RELEASE

OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OPERATION ICE STORM

FOUR DEFENDANTS PLEAD GUILTY TO METH CONSPIRACY

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. – Todd P. Graves, United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, announced that four defendants pleaded guilty in federal court today to participating in a conspiracy that is believed to have distributed at least 15 kilograms of methamphetamine in Jasper County, Mo.

Manuel Villareal-Amarillas, 47, and **Olegario Villareal**, 25, both illegal aliens from Mexico, **Juan H. Gonzalez**, 22, of Carthage, Mo., and **Mark Walker**, 44, of Joplin, Mo., each pleaded guilty in separate appearances before U.S. District Judge Richard E. Dorr this afternoon to charges contained in an Aug. 11, 2004, federal indictment.

Operation Ice Storm, Graves explained, is a multi-agency investigation into an organization based in Mexico that is distributing multi-kilogram amounts of methamphetamine throughout southwest Missouri and Texas.

Each of the defendants admitted to his role in a conspiracy to distribute more than 500 grams of methamphetamine from February 2004 to May 6, 2004, in Jasper County. In today's plea agreements, the government contends that the conspiracy was responsible for the distribution of more than 15 kilograms of methamphetamine.

Villareal-Amarillas admitted that he obtained supplies of methamphetamine from an unknown source, which he redistributed to others in the southwest Missouri area for redistribution. In today's plea agreement, the government contends that **Villareal-Amarillas** was the organizer or leader of the methamphetamine conspiracy.

Villareal, the son of **Villareal-Amarillas**, admitted that he came to Jasper County for the purpose of taking over his father's drug distribution activities after his father's arrest on March 17, 2004. **Villareal** collected drug debts owed to his father from previous drug sales, and

continued supplying members of the organization with methamphetamine for re-distribution. During the course of his involvement in the conspiracy, **Villareal** admitted, he was aware that at least 500 grams but less than 1.5 kilograms of methamphetamine were distributed by members of the organization.

Villareal also pleaded guilty to illegal re-entry, admitting that he entered the United States illegally sometime after May 21, 1999, and was found in Newton County, Mo., on April 15, 2004. This marked at least the third occasion that **Villareal** entered the country illegally, Graves said. **Villareal** had been removed from the United States on Jan. 7, 1998, when he attempted to enter the country under an assumed name in San Diego, Calif. In addition, **Villareal** was removed from the United States on May 21, 1999, when he attempted to enter the country under an assumed name at San Ysidro, Calif.

On Feb. 18, 2005, a fifth co-defendant, **Melanie Fortner** 39, of Joplin, pleaded guilty to her role in the methamphetamine conspiracy. **Fortner** admitted that she obtained methamphetamine from **Villareal-Amarillas**, which she distributed to others in the Jasper County area. **Fortner** also admitted that she assisted **Villareal-Amarillas** in his drug trafficking activities by recording his drug transactions, and that she assisted **Villareal** in the same fashion, by recording drug transactions and collecting drug debts owed to **Villareal-Amarillas**. **Fortner** admitted that members of the conspiracy distributed in excess of 15 kilograms of methamphetamine.

By pleading guilty today, **Villareal-Amarillas** also agreed to forfeit to the government \$78,870, which was derived from the sale of methamphetamine and which was seized by law enforcement officers on March 17, 2004.

By pleading guilty today, **Gonzalez** also agreed to forfeit to the government a total of \$28,556 in proceeds from the sale of methamphetamine, which was seized by law enforcement officers on three separate occasions from his residence, vehicle and hotel room. Officers also seized firearms and items indicative of methamphetamine trafficking from **Gonzalez's** residence and vehicle.

Under federal statutes, **Villareal-Amarillas** could be subject to a mandatory minimum sentence of 20 years in federal prison without parole, up to life imprisonment, plus a fine up to \$8 million. **Villareal**, **Gonzalez**, **Walker** and **Fortner** could each be subject to a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in federal prison without parole, up to life imprisonment, plus a fine up to \$4 million. Sentencing hearings will be scheduled after the completion of presentence investigations by the United States Probation Office.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Robyn L. McKee. It was investigated by the Jasper County Drug Task Force; the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement; the Drug Enforcement Administration; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; the Newton County, Mo., Sheriff's Department; the Joplin, Mo., Police Department; the Jasper County, Mo., Sheriff's Department; and the Barton County, Mo., Sheriff's Department.

This news release, as well as additional information about the office of the United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, is available on-line at

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